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ABSTRACT

This collaborative action research project focused on the educational practice of a voluntary sector playgroup (preschool) in the United Kingdom. It utilized the Quality Evaluation and Development (QED) model to conduct an evaluation phase, action plan phase, development phase, and a reflection phase over the course of the 1994-95 school year. The evaluation phase was based on playgroup documentation, photographs, physical environment schedule, staff biographies, interviews, and child tracking data. The action plan phase allowed the staff to produce plans to improve areas of practice, while the development phase allowed for the implementation of this action plan. The reflection phase allowed time to review the impact of the action plan. A review of the four stages found that the staff were able to develop an effective action plan that led to real improvements in the quality of the children's education. The playgroup practitioners showed considerable development in their style of engagement and interaction with the children. The limitations and key issues uncovered by the research are also discussed. An appendix contains information on the observation rating scales used in the research and Chatterbox Playgroup vignette. (Contains 87 references.) (MDM)

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The impact of the Effective Early Learning 'Quality Evaluation and Development' process upon a voluntary sector Playgroup /Pre-school.

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Worcester College of Higher Education. 1995

The problem

In Britain, the diversity and quality of early years settings that a child of age three or four could encounter is wide ranging. Voluntary sector playgroups (associated with the Pre-school Playgroups Association more recently Pre-School Learning Alliance) are the largest single provider of early years provision catering for 800,000 children. (Education, Science,and Arts Committee, 1988). There is very little research concerning playgroups, however evidence exists, both from my own experience and from a study carried out by the Thomas Coram Research Unit (1992) that shows that their quality is varied. There is no national framework or central government policy for playgroups which could provide common standards for training, staffing, provision of equipment and resources. For this reason I have a commitment and concern to helping playgroup practitioners develop their expertise and effectiveness.
I shall present an in depth case study of the 'Quality Evaluation and Development' process in action in one voluntary sector playgroup.This case study will act as an exemplar of the impact of the action in a Pre-school Learning Alliance playgroup, bearing in mind that in excess of 60 playgroups have been involved in the wider context of the EEL project this year and the evidence of the impact upon their practice will be analysed next year.

N.B. For the purposes of this study I shall maintain the terminology 'playgroup' rather than change to the newly termed 'pre-school'.

Theoretical framework

Research shows that early learning in quality settings has far reaching effects on the social, and educational outcomes of children (Schweinhart 1993,Shorrocks et al 1992). Yet there is no national policy or coherent system for Early Childhood Education in Britain.
"The Quality Evaluation and Development Process" formulated from the Effective Early Learning project at Worcester (Pascal C, Bertram A, & Ramsden F 1994) draws extensively on the views of the practitioners, parents and the children and is a useful tool to document, evaluate and develop practice. This process is based upon Rogerian and Vygotskian constructs of effective teaching and learning and is located in an action research paradigm.

What is a voluntary sector playgroup?

There is no legal definition,but the Children Act guidance and regulations defines playgroups as providing "sessional care for children aged between 3 and 5 .....sessions last no longer than 4 hours" (Department of Health 1991; p 78) Some playgroups offer longer hours or even full

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time day care and the Children Act refer to these as "extended day playgroups". The Department of Education and Science Report stated that,

"generally speaking a playgroup exists where parents have joined together to create and participate in play opportunities for their preschool children. The average playgroup will meet 3 or 4 mornings a week with around 20 children in a church hall or unused school classroom....." (Department of Education and Science,1990; p 63.)

Playgroups are staffed by supervisors or 'leaders' and a group of workers whose pay is dependent upon a parent committee and not a central body. Salaries are decided by the committee and so indirectly by the parents of the children attending.

The Pre-school Playgroups Association (PPA)

The Pre- school Playgroups Association (PPA), more recently the Pre-school Learning Alliance (from February 1995) is the organisation which represents most playgroups. They are financed by members subscriptions, from fund raising and grants from DES, DHSS, Local Education Authorities and member groups. The Pre - School Learning Alliance are committed to promoting the formation of community playgroups which are totally autonomous and whose main features are " parental involvement with parents responsible for all aspects of the running of the group from fund raising to the employment of staff to the purchase of equipment" (Education Committee, 1989; p 64.) A small minority of playgroups are not run in this way. The Pre - School Learning Alliance itself provides support to all member playgroups through a monthly publication 'Contact,' fieldwork and training, and advice on legal and employment concerns.

How did playgroups develop?

The first playgroups began as parent co-operatives in the 1950's to fill the gap created by the limited provision of nursery education for 3 and 4 year olds. The Pre- School Playgroups Association was established in 1961 by parents " to make good a deficiency in the provision of statutory nursery education" (Pre- School Playgroups Association Review Report, 1990; p 3.) Playgroups have been used by some local authorities as an alternative to nursery education. Unfortunately the low public cost of playgroups has definitely contributed to their rapid expansion. In the 1960's playgroups rapidly increased in England and the chart below indicates that this has continued to be the case, until more recently when numbers have shown a slight decline:

In 1972 263,000 places in 10,600 sessional playgroups.
In 1990 416,381 places in 17,789 sessional playgroups.
In 1991 420,400 places in 17,600 sessional playgroups.

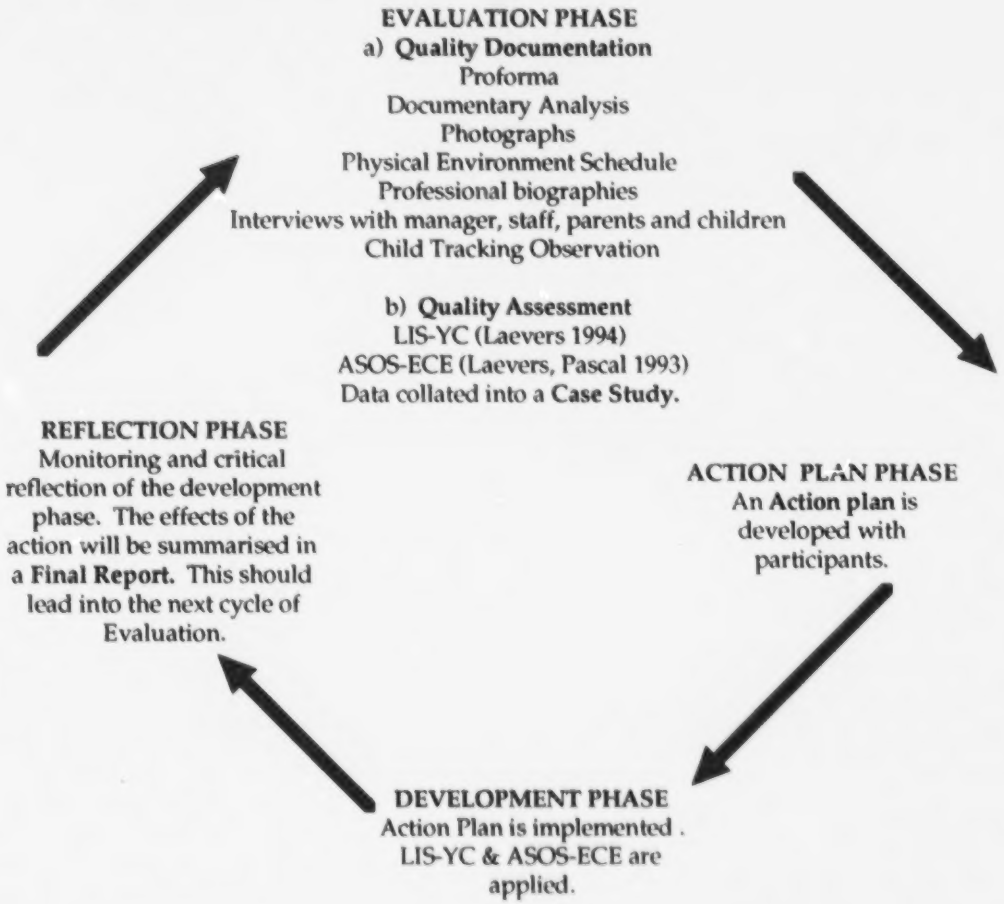
Funding for the Pre school Learning Alliance Playgroups.

The Pre school Learning Alliance receive £4 million p.a. from Government grants and £50 million is raised p.a. by parents through fees and fund raising. Indeed although clear figures are difficult to gain, the Pre school Learning Alliance estimate taking all sources of grant into account, that £10 p.a is received for each playgroup child, which can be compared with £1,039 per child for the cost of a nursery class place, and £1,505 p.a in a nursery school (Pre School Playgroups Association,1990; p 34-35),this can be also be compared with £1,700 p.a. per child in maintained education. This indicates that firstly the Government are taking the 'cheap route' encouraging parents to use playgroups. Secondly it shows the great financial difficulty that playgroups suffer in order to try to run efficiently. As the Pre schools Playgroup

Association Review Report states,
"This is not sufficient to allow playgroups to function effectively and to their full potential"
(Pre school Playgroups Association 1990; para 9.13,p 35.)
I have explained briefly what a playgroup is and now I shall outline my research project.

Research Methodology - Practitioner Research

This is a collaborative action research project which focuses on the practice of voluntary sector playgroups.The methodology for this piece of research uses the EEL'Quality Evaluation and Development' process (Pascal,Bertram and Ramsden, 1994). The process is conceptualised in a model which has four key stages. The model clearly shows that a large quantity of detailed qualitative data is collected collaboratively, so that the practitioners and the researcher can evaluate the quality of the playgroup's practice using the 10 dimensions of quality (Pascal C & Bertram A 1991) as a framework.
The cycle is outlined in the diagram below:


EVALUATION PHASE
a) Quality Documentation
Proforma
Documentary Analysis
Photographs
Physical Environment Schedule
Professional biographies
Interviews with manager, staff, parents and children
Child Tracking Observation
b) Quality Assessment
LIS-YC (Laevers 1994)
ASOS-ECE (Laevers, Pascal 1993)
Data collated into a Case Study.
ACTION PLAN PHASE
An Action plan is developed with participants.
DEVELOPMENT PHASE
Action Plan is implemented . LIS-YC & ASOS-ECE are applied.
REFLECTION PHASE
Monitoring and critical reflection of the development phase. The effects of the action will be summarised in a Final Report. This should lead into the next cycle of Evaluation.

(Pascal C, Bertram A, & Ramsden F 1994)

Data Collection and Analysis

The research cycle commenced in the playgroup from September 1994 and was completed in April 1995. After each period of data collection the staff and I would discuss the findings informally. Ethically, I felt this was all part of the collaborative and 'open' process and clearly made everyone in the setting feel more at ease with me and the research.

The Evaluation phase

In the Evaluation phase data was collected by myself and the practitioners in the setting using a number of research tools:

A. Quality documentation:

i) A proforma - this document was developed from an analysis of the information that would be needed to provide the case study with background information with the 10 dimensions of quality acting as a guide.

ii) Collection of any relevant documents - documents were collected to supply background information for the writing of the case study. For example, playgroup's letter to new parents, the Pre School Playgroup Association policy documents, and newsletters.

iii) Photographs- I found photographs a useful tool in the case study to add interest, to help explain a situation and as a prompt in the interviews with children.

iv) Physical environment schedule - This schedule was adapted from a whole host of rating scales and tick lists for example Harms and Clifford (1980), McCail G (1991) and the work carried out by Bredekamp (1987). Unlike 'normal' rating scales it was not used in a judgmental way, but purely as a means of documenting the type and condition of the facilities in which the playgroup operated.The schedule was completed by the Playgroup Leader and myself,together.

v) Professional biographies - The biographies were completed by all members of staff in order to provide a synopsis of their training, qualifications, experience to date and future career aspirations and developments.

vi) Interviews- The aim of the interviews is to provide an all round perspective of the playgroup practice and to incorporate all participants feelings, beliefs and views so providing a 'triangulation' of playgroup practice. Interview schedules were developed from the 10 dimensions of quality (Pascal and Bertram 1990) and are used to provide a framework for informal chats with all the participants,including:

* the Playgroup leader
* each member of staff
* a sample of 5 parents, from a total of 20 parents
* two groups of three children, from a total of 24 children.

vii) Child tracking - This observation technique developed and was adapted from an in depth study of Sylva's target child observations (Sylva,1980) and other focussed observation techniques. The aim of the Child tracking research instrument is to gain an understanding of individual children's interaction with other children and adults in the playgroup, the amount of child choice in the activities, the level of the child's involvement,and the areas of learning that the child is experiencing. I produced a video to help practitioners to understand the technique.

Child tracking data collection:

* 5 children were tracked including a sample of boys and girls, and 3 and 4 year olds.

* Each child was observed for 5 minute periods twice on two separate mornings.
* The child tracking observation sheets were used to record the information.

Data analysis: The child tracking data was collated into bar graphs showing the 'Zone of initiative', 'learning experiences' and 'interaction' for the whole setting.

B. Quality Assessment:

Two quantitative measures are also used as a support to this qualitative data. It became evident that rating scales applied very preconceived, rigid criteria and that for my purpose this did not fit with a collaborative approach to research. Outcome measures were not appropriate and so the study focusses on the processes of learning. There are two key factors in the quality and effectiveness of early learning. Firstly the way the child engages in the process of learning - 'Involvement'. Secondly the way in which the adults who work with the child support and facilitate that learning- 'Engagement'. (Pascal, Bertram, and Ramsden,1994; p 53).The theoretical background and rationale of these two quantitative measures can be found in the Appendix.

'Involvement' data collection:

* 50% of the children were observed, a total of 12 children, incorporating an equal number of girls and boys, and 3 and 4 year olds.
* Each child was observed for 2 minutes periods on three separate occasions on two mornings.
* Each observation was recorded on the Leuven Involvement Scale for Young Children (LIS-YC) sheet.

Data analysis: The LIS-YC data was amalgamated to make a bar chart which indicates the range and average level of involvement for the whole setting.

'Engagement' data collection:

* All of the staff were observed.
* Each adult was observed on 4 separate days.
* Each observation lasted for 2 minutes and was carried out 5 times each session.
* Each observation was recorded on the Adult Style Observation Schedule for Early Childhood Education (ASOS-ECE).

Data analysis: The ASOS - ECE data was amalgamated to make a bar chart which indicates the cumulative tally for each point on the schedule for each of the action categories for the whole setting.

Analysis of the data and the writing of the case study

The research instruments that I have used, in themselves do not enhance quality. They can only serve to document what occurs in practice in the playgroup. Their true potential for assessing and evaluating quality can only be reached by the feedback of the data to the practitioners themselves.Therefore, after careful analysis of the data, I documented the results into a 'prestructured case study' which,

"is aimed at solving the problems of researcher over-load and labour intensiveness while retaining a rigorous, systematic approach to analysis", (Miles, M. B. 1990; p. 43.)

I used the '10 Dimensions of Quality in Early Learning' (Pascal and Bertram 1991) as a framework for the evaluation of quality in the case study.

Validation of the case study

It was important that the case study was 'owned' by the playgroup participants. The generation of quality improvements to practice must come from within the group in "a shared democratic process" Pascal (1993) where the practitioners have true ownership. Therefore I purposefully

kept the case study succinct and I hand wrote it in a draft form initially, so that the participants felt it was open to their criticism,alteration and was not in its final form. From previous experience I learnt that a large, typed manuscript appeared very formal and imposing. I asked the practitioners whether the case study was a true reflection of their playgroup practice. Together, we altered the case study to incorporate their suggestions and ideas. Then the staff and I used this case study as a basis for an action plan meeting.

The Action Plan phase

In the second stage of the cycle the staff from the case study, formulated an action plan, to highlight areas that they felt needed improvement/development in their practice.
Obviously an action plan has limitations in the playgroup context due to the lack of funds and resources. The action plan therefore will give the participants short term goals to aim for and clear overall long term objectives within a time scale.

The Development Phase

During the Development Phase, the Action Plan was carried out by the playgroup staff. At the end of this stage the Leuven Involvement Schedule and the Adult Style Observation Schedule-Early Childhood Education were used again, as a means of gauging the effect of the action on the learning experiences of the children in the playgroup.

The Reflection Phase

In the final stage the playgroup staff were encouraged to reflect upon the Evaluation and Development process and to review the impact that it has had on their practice. I helped the staff to reflect in several ways, as outlined below:

1. Vignettes (Miles 1990) -The staff were asked if they would write a vignette. A vignette provides a cameo or 'snapshot' of a practitioner at work. It is a brief summary of any aspect of practice which the practitioners have planned,chosen to change or experiment upon.It is a reflection of a recent episode which went well or badly. I found the vignettes helped the practitioners to reflect on their practice in an open, self-analytical way. One staff member wrote to me afterwards, "I've done it.... I was surprised that once I started writing I had a lot to say - or is that not a surprise....." This summarises how a catalyst can help practitioners bring about change through their own reflections on practice.(An example of a vignette can be found in the Appendix.)

2. A Reflective Questionnaire was given to all members of staff for them to reflect on the process that they had undertaken in the project.

3. The final report - I wrote a final report encompassing all of the above information. It also outlined the areas in which the playgroup practitioners felt they wanted to develop in the future, and discussed the next cycle of Evaluation and Development.

A brief synopsis of the playgroup's action plan

The playgroup practitioners from their evaluative case study were very keen to look at all aspects of their practice;however as the playgroup leader stated, "we can't do it all at once - otherwise nothing will be done well". Therefore in a plan they agreed priorities for action which I have summarised below, with an outline of the impact:
1. Aim: To develop the staff's observation techniques and to increase the children's levels of involvement.
Method: The staff were trained by the researcher in the involvement observation technique

using a video and handouts on the scale and signals. This method of observation has been used practically by the staff to increase their awareness of the children's individual needs and to increase their involvement levels.

2. Aim: To promote positive interaction between the adults and the children particularly during role play.
Method: The staff have experimented with new ideas for imaginative play eg. by setting up a hospital in the role play corner. Adult interaction with the children has been stimulated with new ideas eg.using glove puppets to enact a story.

3. Aim: To focus on selected learning experiences for the children which the staff felt needed development. Providing more adult stimulation and input for example during story time.
Method: Each member of staff has planned, prepared and then actioned story times. Various methods have been trialled eg.use of props, small groups, one large group, suitable stories to suit specific interests of the children, the use of very large books and with visitors from outside playgroup bringing in stories eg. a local librarian. All of the staff have given a lot of time and commitment to this area of the action plan, and great improvements can be seen. (See Appendix for an example of a Vignette)

4. Aim: To enhance the children's autonomy and independence.
Method: More opportunity has been provided for children's autonomy to be increased, as can be seen by the second round of Adult Style observations. In the '+4' area and creative activities, the staff have given the children opportunity to experiment more, to decide when they feel an activity or the end product is complete. The painting or creative activity is quite often kept out after break time now, so enabling the children to complete the task that they have started. Child initiated activities are not stopped but actively pursued by the staff.

5. Aim: To ensure the safety of the children at the end of the session.
Method: The staff have actioned experimental end of sessions, and also asked the Committee for their ideas. This culminated in a questionnaire being written by the committee for the parents to contribute their ideas with regard to the arrangements for the safe collection of their children.

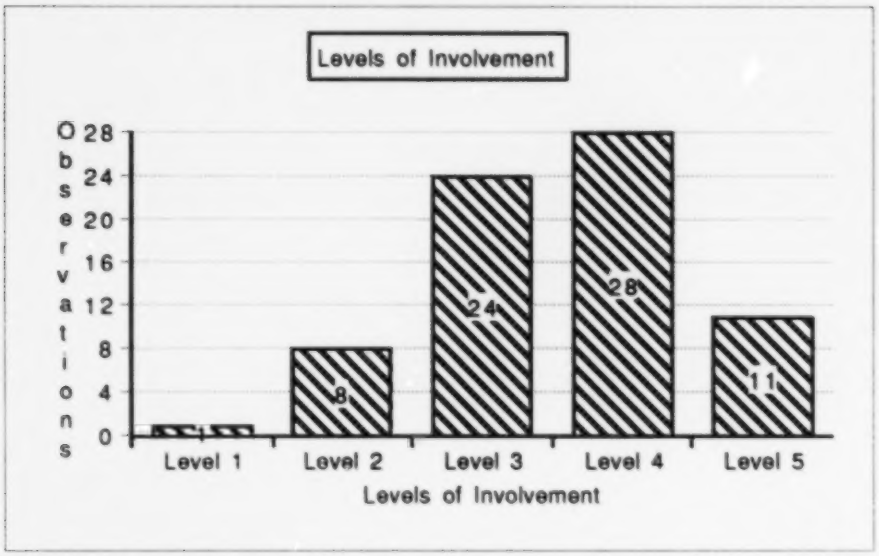
6. Aim: To provide more physical exercise for the children at playgroup.
Method: From the observations encapsulated in the case study and from the interviews with the parents it became clear to the staff that there was a need for more physical exercise for the children. To this effect the staff decided to experiment with the layout of the room. At one end of the hall wheeled toys such as bikes, prams and a sit-in car were placed. At the other end of the hall, partitioned off with large chairs, were table top and floor activities. This worked very well with the children free to participate at either end of the hall whenever they chose with the proviso that wheeled vehicles were not allowed in the floor and table top area, as this was too disruptive and dangerous to those children playing on the floor.
At another session simple team games were trialled using the entire hall. This was greatly enjoyed by everyone.

Achievements

1. There is evidence of real improvements in the quality of the children's learning at playgroup.
This is clearly shown through the marked increase in children's involvement from an average of 3.5 at the start of the study cycle to 4.1 at the end of the study cycle. This indicates that children were reaching higher involvement with intense motivation, persistence,creativity and concentration in their learning. More importantly the staff and parents were more aware of the 'involvement' learning process and it focussed their observations to the individual needs of children.

LEVELS OF INVOLVEMENT

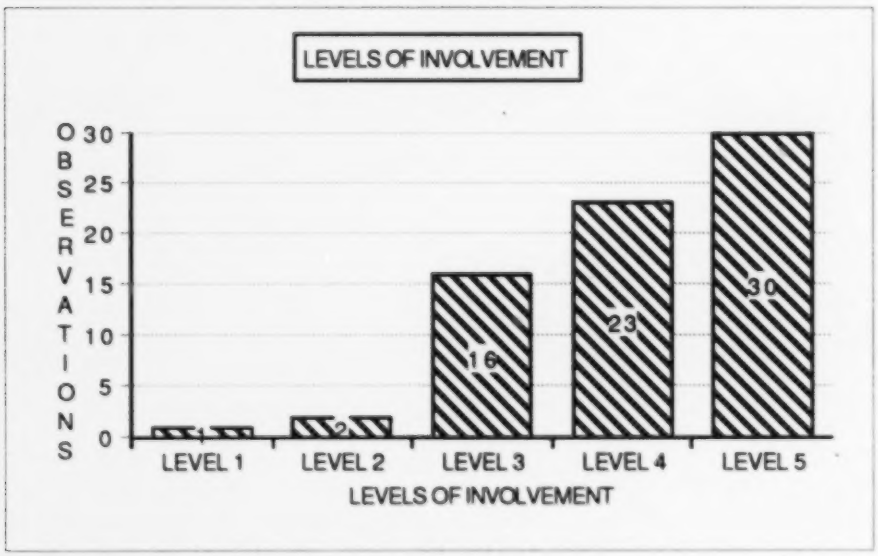
First Round of Observations:
SEPTEMBER/ OCTOBER 1994



The average level of involvement for the setting was = 3.5

Results of Second Round of Observations:

MARCH 1995.



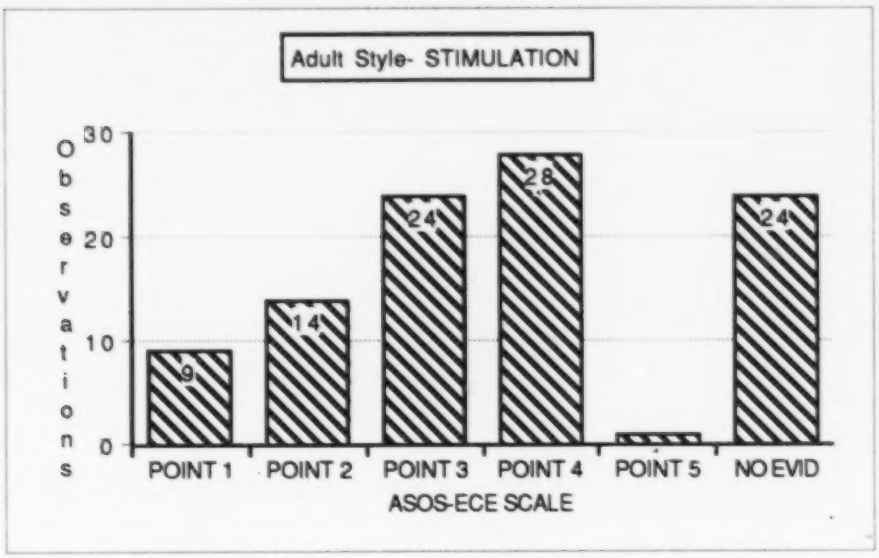
The average level of involvement for the setting = 4.1

It is clear from the observations that the average level of involvement has increased greatly. There is also a greater incidence of level 5-high involvement.

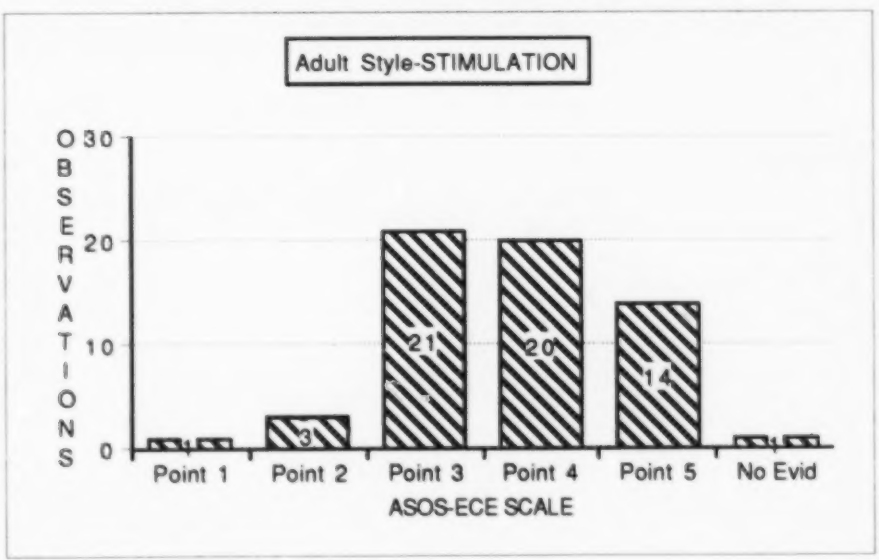
2. The playgroup practitioners show considerable development in their style of 'engagement' and interaction with the children.

The staff are more aware of the importance of showing more engaging qualities when they are interacting with the children, as a staff member noted, " I feel that the children have noticed more because we have got so much more involved ourselves." This manifests itself in the adult observations where all aspects of stimulation,sensitivity,and autonomy show considerable development during the study period.

ADULT STYLE OBSERVATION SCHEDULE
First Round of Observations: Sept/Oct 1994



ADULT STYLE OBSERVATION SCHEDULE
Results of Second Round of Observations: March 1995



ADULT STYLE OBSERVATION SCHEDULE
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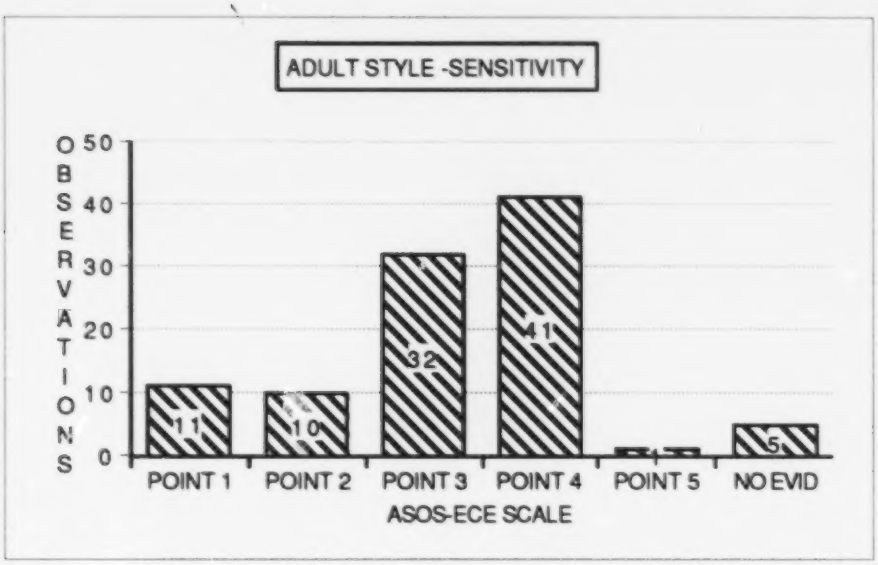
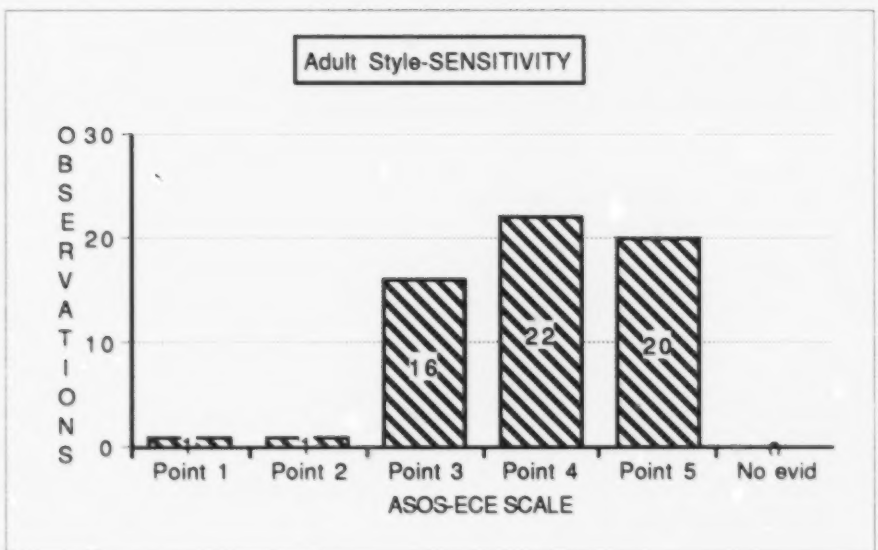


ADULT STYLE OBSERVATION SCHEDULE
Results of Second Round of Observations:March 1995



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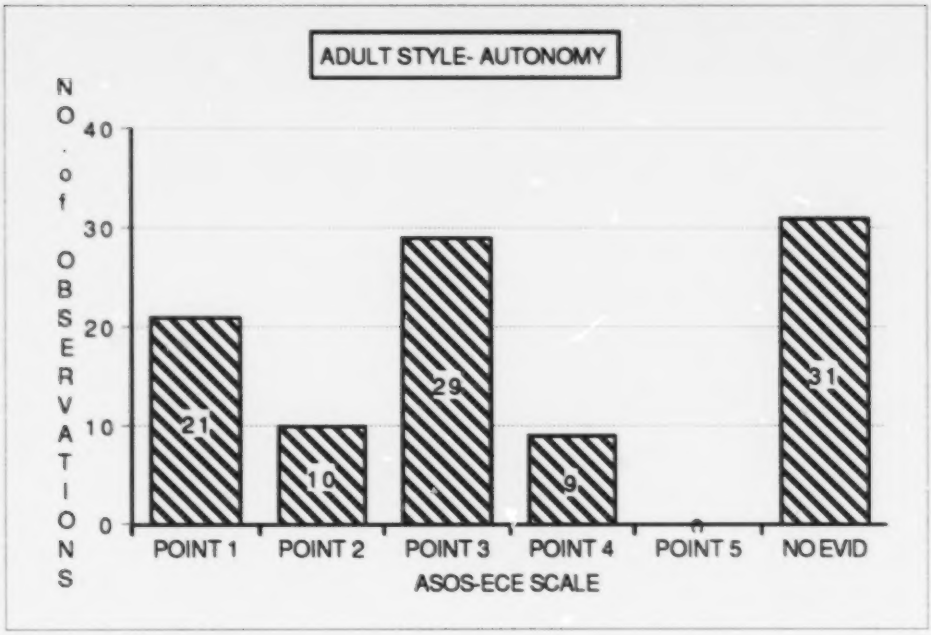
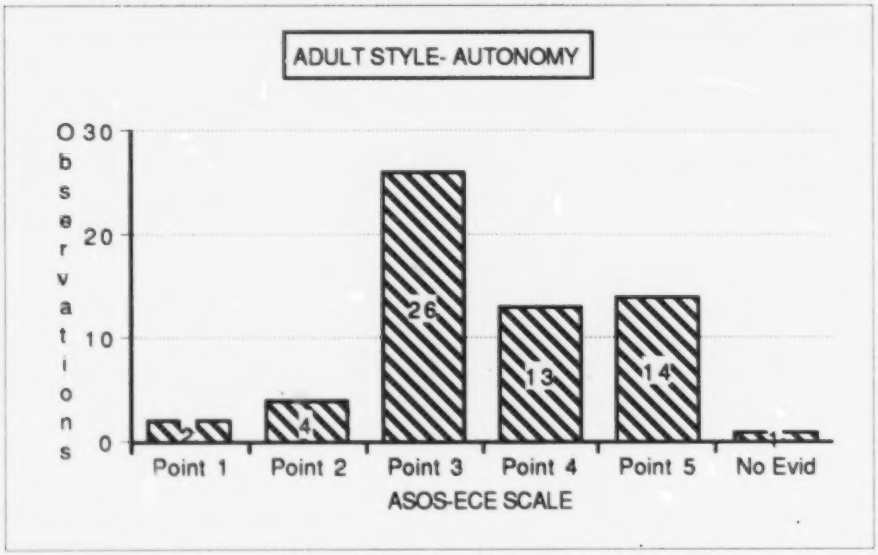


ADULT STYLE OBSERVATION SCHEDULE
Results of Second Round of Observations:March 1995



It is clear from the graphs that in all areas of sensitivity,stimulation and autonomy, there has been an increase in staff showing more engaging qualities. There is evidence of point 5 in all of these aspects of the adults style which previously there was not.

Stimulation has increased with the adults motivating the children with real energy and keenness, particularly this has improved at story time where suitable stories are chosen and props keep the children's attention and interest. The adults stimulate dialogue with the children particularly at the creative activities, during individual story telling and in some cases during role/imaginative play.

Sensitivity has increased, particularly with the adults putting themselves on the same level as the children, giving encouragement and listening to the children.

Autonomy has increased considerably with the adults being more aware of giving the children freedom to choose, for example when they have completed a painting or construction. There is much more opportunity for the children to experiment particularly at the creative activities where the outcomes of their work are not seen as important as the process. Explanations of the rules of the playgroup are given to the children and are handled sensitively by the adults, for example why it is not safe to drive bikes or sit-in cars from the active area through the chair boundary to the quiet and floor play area.

From the observations it is clear that 'No Evidence' has declined considerably. This is due to the staff spending more time interacting with the children and less time on domestic duties. Obviously these duties have to be undertaken but they are carried out on a rota basis, so not all staff are involved, and therefore can remain interacting with the children where necessary.

3. The process of 'Quality Evaluation and Development' will continue.

With all research there is a worry that once the researcher has pulled out of the setting the original impetus will die. The staff have already positively planned their next round of evaluation and development,with plans to carry on the story time experiments, to extend the children's imaginative play, to instigate outside play by utilising a part of the surrounding car park, and to utilise the local college library facilities eg. for music and movement tapes. One staff member summarised the impact of the cycle by stating, "The process can only be improved as long as we continue to do our project, we have to keep going and keep on learning ourselves."
Although the staff have not always been successful in their experiments on practice, they are still keen to carry on experimenting, because, "making mistakes implies that we have taken risks; taking risks assumes that staff have the self- confidence and the ability to make decisions and to take on personal responsibility." (Whalley, M,1992; in Pugh,1992; p 157).

4. The playgroup staff felt more confident and empowered to promote the importance of their early years work.

The collaborative action research process based on democratic evaluation,development and reflection has had an empowering effect on the playgroup practitioners. The evidence to prove this manifests itself in several ways: For example, Playgroup leader, Mavis was often stressing to me the difficulties she faced in keeping staff when they were so lowly paid, I explained to her that unless she stressed this to the policy makers, then nothing would ever change. So at the next Pre- school Playgroup Association conference,to an audience of 500 playgroup personnel, she stood up, very nervously and stated the need for staff to have a national salary scale. She received a standing ovation from the rest of the field workers. They all were in agreement, having suffered the effects, but until then no-one had dared to speak! Mavis was elated, when she heard, as a result of her speech,and the strength of the general feeling, that the Pre- school Playgroup Association were investigating how to implement a national salary scale for all its workers! This is a wonderful example of, "The feeling of power and confidence achieved by powerless groups who challenge their ascribed position in society by acting collectively." (Dominelli,1990;p 126)

Another staff member Liz, who held no early years qualification, feels that now, she has the confidence and incentive to start the Pre- school Playgroup Association Diploma course as she stated, " Your study has had a very good effect on me, it has really opened my eyes, I did not realise just how much more you could do with children... it has showed me how they learn through play and just what they get out of it... I am hoping to go on the Diploma course, now, so I am very grateful for learning this..."

Limitations

I am very aware that as with all research studies it has limitations which I must acknowledge:
1. It is subject to bias - I collected the data with the help of the practitioners in the setting, so there is an element of subjectivity, but this is made explicit and the validity of the data is strengthened by gaining all participants (including parents, staff, and children) views and perspectives, so providing a triangulation of the whole situation. Also,the quantitative observations provide evidence of a harder nature to substantiate these claims.

2. Staff changes have occurred within the study time scale - It could be stated that the staff changes that have occurred during the study could make the data invalid. As stated earlier high turnover of staff is very typical of playgroups, therefore I feel it is important that my study reflects this normal playgroup practice. I am pleased that each new member of staff felt able to be part of the research team and the new Playgroup Leader particularly has taken up the next cycle of 'Evaluation and Development' with gusto.

3. What implications does this small scale research study hold in relation to playgroups on a wider scale? - I feel it is important that research has an impact upon practice and that it has a wider applicability. The research serves to show that this collaborative action approach to developing practice in a playgroup setting works well. It allows for the unique character and individuality of all settings, but it also has the advantage of being able to interpret the quality of the learning, in each setting, using the ten dimensions as a framework. The 'Model for Quality Evaluation and Development' can be successfully used in a voluntary 'Playgroup' environment with positive effect, particularly if it is supported with resources, staff training, and funding. This process could be a precursor to the Pre-school Learning Alliances Accreditation Scheme and a positive means of highlighting and improving areas requiring development for the Playgroups.

Now, I should like to discuss the key issues that this study has highlighted and the implications that they hold for the wider context of early childhood education practitioners and provision.

Key issues emerging:

The research study highlighted a number of difficulties in carrying out an evaluation and development process in a playgroup. These difficulties have much wider implications for the voluntary sector Playgroups in terms of access to resources, funding, staff salaries and training.Therefore I shall provide a brief synopsis of each of these issues.

1. **Funding**: The basis of many of the difficulties that playgroups face is due to funding. With playgroups being one of the major providers of early childhood education, it is not suitable that they are funded largely through parental fees and fund raising. It is this factor that causes playgroups great instability, as shown in my own study where numbers of children declined, income consequently declined, so the playgroup found it difficult to pay the hall rental and the staff salaries. The playgroup committee fought to keep the playgroup alive for the 15 children who wanted and needed to attend. In a rural community access to any other form of early years provision is often limited due to the lack of mobility (urban areas have a host of other problems too). After one term the children's numbers had risen again showing

that the decline had only been temporary and yet the local community could have lost a much needed service. This highlights a real issue in the running of a playgroup in a voluntary capacity where there is a lack of secure funding and a total dependency upon fees from parents. Organising a major form of early years educational provision, with a 'hand to mouth' philosophy is scandalous and needs to be addressed urgently.

Funding, also has a dramatic effect upon a number of other issues, as outlined below:

2. **Resources**: Resources such as toys and books are limited due to the lack of storage space and are dependent upon fund raising. The affluence of the local area can greatly effect the resources made available to the playgroup and consequently effects the learning environment of the children. More affluent areas can raise money through their fetes and coffee mornings unlike a more disadvantaged area. Inequalities therefore appear between playgroups and the provision that they offer. Is this a fair, or adequate system of providing early childhood education when it is based upon where you live and how much money your parents can fund raise?

3. **Staff salaries**: Playgroups developed in the 1960's as a voluntary self help scheme to combat the lack of state run nursery provision. Although very few playgroups are now organised totally on a voluntary basis, there is still no national policy for staff salaries. Staff pay is largely decided by each individual playgroup committee, and therefore dependent again upon funding. As a consequence huge inequalities appear between the wages of one playgroup and another and this is obviously dependent upon the wealth of the area in which the playgroup is situated. More affluent areas can afford higher salaries and therefore can attract more experienced and qualified staff. An example of this can be seen by comparing a PPA field workers pay of 50 pence per hour in Hereford and Worcester, to £5.50 per hour for the same work in Berkshire. Is it a fair system that allows such anomalies, particularly when it has a direct effect upon our young children's early education ? Salary levels are low for all members of staff. Nationally in 1990, the Pre school Playgroups Association Survey found that Playgroup Leaders earned on average £6.92 per session - £2.80 per hour. This can be compared with the average gross pay for all women workers (manual and non manual) in 1990 of £5.25 per hour (Department of Employment, 1990). From my own observations, a leader is paid £10 for a session lasting 3 hours with half an hour preparation beforehand, and half an hour packing away, making a total of 4 hours. In addition planning time, ordering of equipment, and staff meetings (usually held at Leader's own home with refreshments provided) are held in the staff's own time. Visits and trips are often totally unpaid too. In a playgroup open three sessions a week, a Leader will expect to work a 16 hour week for £30 or £1.87 per hour (1994). Rates for staff or assistants are even lower, from my experience £7.00 for a morning's work of 4 hours, totalling £1.75 per hour.

4. **Staff training**: A high proportion of staff are not trained for early years work when they join playgroups. The low pay for workers acts as a disincentive for many highly qualified staff to remain with the playgroups, and may put off many prospective workers too. Training for playgroup staff is often dependent on staff funding themselves through courses and also having to organise child care arrangements and arrange cover at playgroup whilst they are attending the course. In certain cases the staff training is subsidised by money raised by the playgroup. Research evidence points to the importance of early childhood education being of high quality (Schweinhart et al 1993) and that one aspect of this quality is the important role played by trained staff - it seems ludicrous therefore that playgroup workers are given very little incentive to further their training.

5. **Terms and Conditions of employment:** Playgroup workers very rarely have any form of sick pay, maternity allowance, a contract of employment, holiday pay, or pension. Staff meetings are held at the workers own expense and in their own time, which indicates to the staff that planning and reflection on practice are not held in high esteem. Indeed the Thomas

Coram Research Unit (1992) found that 81% of leaders in rural areas had no contract of employment, with 42% in urban areas, giving an average of 60%. From my experience, if a member of staff is sick, then it is her role to find another member of staff to cover and consequently, it is the 'stand in' staff member who receives payment for the session. These factors, along with the low pay and poor accommodation, have the effect of staff rarely seeking a long term career in playgroup work, and also adds to a feeling of low status and low morale for the workers.

6. **Staff and Committee Turnover:** From my experience, as a consequence of the poor pay, poor training etc., playgroup workers on the whole feel dispirited, undervalued, lack confidence, and they see their work as low in status. This has the effect that playgroups have a great staff and committee turnover. A state that is often exacerbated in the new academic year when the whole committee may have changed with very little liaison or continuity between the old and the new. This leaves the new committee fumbling to cope with the finances, secretarial work, and a whole host of other managerial problems, with no prior expertise.

7. **Parental Involvement:** The Pre school Playgroups Association state: "playgroups are a special form of provision ....synonymous with parental involvement and parent run education" (Pre school Playgroups Association, 1989b; p. 2).This situation where parental involvement is rife appears to be changing in playgroups. The rapid labour market changes that have occurred recently in Britain have led to an increase in employment among women with children under 5. For example, between 1984 and 1989 women with children under 5 gaining employment rose from 27% to 40%. As a consequence of more mothers working some playgroups have had to offer longer hours in order to remain open. In 1989, 600 playgroups offered extended day care (open on average 9 hours per day) whereas this increased to 1,019 groups in 1991(Pre school Playgroups Association,1991, p 1). Seemingly, another effect of mothers increased employment shown at playgroups, is the difficulty in gaining parental 'help' on a day to day basis, actually in the playgroup. Often as a consequence of this, many groups use a 'rota' helper system. Instead of relying on the goodwill of parents to help at playgroup, they are now placed onto a rota. The penalty for not being able to help is that parents pay extra fees.

8. **Physical Environment:** Probably one of the major constraints that most playgroups suffer is associated with their physical environment. A lack of funds causes playgroups to try to find the cheapest accommodation available. Often this comprises very inadequate facilities particularly for very young children. The facilities are often rented and consequently shared with other community groups. Around 66.6% (or two thirds) of playgroups meet in church, village or community halls. The remainder use a variety of premises including schools (10%), sports clubs (3%), guide or scout halls (2%) or private homes(2%). Very few have purpose built accommodation, but more to the point, most groups share premises with other organisations. This presents a major problem, for 80% of playgroups who have to 'pack away' materials and equipment at the end of each session. Only 10% of playgroups never have to clear away for other users. (Pre school Playgroups Association, 1993).
Compounding this problem are 2 other points:

1. Sharing facilities and/or renting accommodation often means that there are considerable restrictions on the playgroup's practice, for example, nothing is allowed to be placed on the walls. Sand, water and paint is banned and a place for children's belongings has to be temporary. Toilets and washing facilities are often very basic and very rarely child sized. Kitchen facilities are often unheated and consequently very draughty. Access to an outside area is rare.

2. The equipment for the entire playgroup often has to be fitted into a storage cupboard (which can be locked) every session. This usually means that the amount of equipment has to be kept to a minimum, in order to fit the cupboard. Access to the cupboard is often difficult too, and staff need a diploma in how to pack it! (This may sound unnecessarily picky, but I

have known a playgroup where all equipment has to be stored under a stage, and this meant staff crawling on their stomachs in the dark to retrieve the necessary items in order to set up the playgroup). New and any additional equipment has to be bought by the playgroup. This entails fund raising or reliance upon donations from local charities.

These examples serve to illustrate Sir Christopher Ball's cause for concern when he stated that, "Playgroups represent a major proportion of all under fives provision. Many are excellent but quality within this sector is known to be highly variable, and concern has been expressed about under resourcing, inadequate premises, lack of suitable equipment." (Ball,C,1994; p 124)

What is needed to make playgroups a viable proposition within the context of Early Childhood Education ?

Playgroups over the past thirty years have contributed a much needed service for large numbers of young children. This service has also been of great benefit to the children's parents, particularly mothers in terms of providing care for their children in a social and educational context, and by providing themselves with training and employment opportunities. My small scale study recognises that playgroups do have a role to play in providing an early years service, particularly as the staff involved are very keen and often possess a natural empathy towards children and a sincerity and warmth to which young children adhere. Based on the evidence from my studies however, I firmly believe that as a nation we cannot continue to formulate our early childhood educational policy upon a 'make do and mend' system. A system where playgroups have been regarded as a cheap, alternative nursery service, yet in actual fact it is the mothers and other low paid and voluntary workers who have subsidised the true cost. Our young children's education is far too important to be dependent upon the whim of Local Authorities to provide money left over from their budget to 'help out' the playgroups in their area. In the words of The Rowntree Foundation Inquiry into Income and Wealth,

" The ultimate purpose of an economy is not to sustain itself for its own sake but to promote the welfare of present and future citizens...High quality investment in children in turn feeds through into future economic prosperity. Parents and non-parents alike have an interest in children, since they represent the future of the whole community" (The Joseph Rowntree Foundation,1995; p 34).

State provided nursery education in Britain is unlikely in the current political climate, therefore the diversity of early years provision and the lack of early years educational policy looks set to continue. I have shown that it is essential that high quality early education is established within this diverse context. Playgroups, if they are to play an active and worthwhile part in the early childhood education context need to address the issue of quality in their practice, and demand from the nation access to a system of **real** funding that allows for staff training and qualifications, satisfactory conditions of employment, accommodation and resources. The Pre School Learning Alliance (PPA) needs to incorporate a national salary scale whereby all playgroup workers, irrelevant of their geographical location, have a basic wage with employment conditions such as maternity leave, and sick pay.

For me personally I feel that through the research I have answered some of my initial questions, but more importantly it has highlighted a host of new, probably more difficult, questions that need to be addressed. My initial difficulties in gaining access into a playgroup highlighted a crucial question - How can the confidence of all early years practitioners be strengthened, so that they feel able to implement change and are open to development and reflection on their practice?

If practitioners themselves want to improve early years education then they will have to become more political. Early years educators have felt powerless to be in control of their destiny, this has partially derived from a historical background in which the early years was felt to be women's work and hence of little value. This situation has changed more recently with the

increased status of the early years politically, however early years workers must become advocates for the young children in their care in order to effect policy decisions. "All forms of education are political because they can enable or inhibit the questioning habits of students, thus developing or disabling their critical relation to knowledge, schooling, and society." (Shor, I ,1992; p 13) Early childhood educators cannot remain inactive, passive beings, I reiterate the words of Professor Pascal,

"I look forward to the emergence of a body of early childhood professionals who are confident, proud, and dignified with a strong sense of their own self worth and an unshakeable belief in the importance of what they do. Our children deserve no less." (Pascal, 1992; p 10).

Improvements in practice are shown within both my study and the wider Effective Early Learning Project to be most successful where practitioners are involved in a shared collaborative venture of quality evaluation and development. The money made available to finance the present greatly mooted vouchers system could be utilised to provide resources and a quality evaluation and development process for all playgroups and early years provision. My study indicates that this would not only improve the quality of provision substantially, but would also empower the practitioners and consequently the children.

The implications for practice

My research serves to show that the 'Quality Evaluation and Development' process can be successfully used in a voluntary playgroup environment. The collaborative action approach to developing practice in playgroup settings works well where the process is opted into not imposed. In this way the professional development of the practitioners is enhanced and I have shown that they become empowered by the process. This has a very positive effect on their practice and consequently I have shown the tremendous impact that it can have upon young children's learning. This process could be a precursor to the Pre-school Learning Alliances Accreditation Scheme and a positive means of highlighting and improving areas requiring development for the playgroups.

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APPENDIX

The Leuven Involvement Scale for Young Children-(LIS-YC)

Background Information

Professor Ferre Laevers from the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium developed the innovative theory of Experiential Education or EXE in 1976, in order to try to answer a greatly mooted question"What constitutes good quality education?" Within this theory he defined the degree of 'involvement" to be the most valid indicator of the development of the child. He defines this concept of involvement by,
"a quality of human activity, characterised by concentration and persistence, a high level of motivation, intense perceptions and experiencing of meaning, a strong flow of energy, a high degree of satisfaction and based on the exploratory drive and basic developmental schemes". (Laevers F, 1992; p 7)
He goes on to state that an involved child is "highly motivated" and that the source of this motivation is an "eagerness to understand and learn".

Children are not always driven to this degree of involvement by themselves. From my observations whilst working in early years settings Prof. Laevers's theory seems to hold true. There is definite evidence of some children who are extremely engrossed in a particular activity, eg. in a playgroup in Derbyshire, one girl Charlotte aged 4 years, enjoyed painting at an easel and became so totally absorbed on her masterpiece, that she could not comprehend 'pack away' time and would cry. There are other children who do not settle at anything and the staff usually term them "difficult", and yet I have often found that adult interaction can help these children to find an activity that absorbs them. As Laevers stated, "the maintenance of intense activity requires the highest educational competence of adults" (Laevers F ,1992; p 8) as a clear indication of the very great effect that the quality of the adult has upon the child. He also recognises that a highly motivated child will perform at their maximum capability, and that if a task is too easy, or to the other extreme, too difficult, then the child will not become involved, and so demotivation will occur. It is here that the role of the adult is so crucial. A trained adult will observe and recognise a child's potential and be able to establish strategies that hit these potential areas of growth, enveloping their motivation and consequent involvement. As he states, the adult's "daily search for the interventions that set free the energy in the learner and make the wonderful process of development happen" (Laevers F, 1992; p 9).

Professor F Laevers is not alone in this area of his theory. It was Vygotsky's belief that a familiar adult carers interaction and intervention was of central importance to help develop a child's memory and mind. He spoke of a "Zone of Proximal Development" (as outlined in more detail in the text earlier) which is very attuned to Laevers "areas of growth". Vygotsky (1978) believed that children have varying capacities for development and that it was the role of the teacher to help them gain their full individual potential which lay at differing points between the child's present level and it's potential level.
Both Laevers and Vygotsky recognise that an inner motivation or 'involvement', once experienced, activates a deep level of learning and a great satisfaction within the child. This deep learning is of paramount importance to the child's total long-term education.
The Leuven Involvement Scale for Young Children (LIS-YC) has been developed by Prof. Laevers in order to assess the involvement of children in early years settings. However, this scale has not been tested in British playgroups. The whole scale is detailed in this appendix. Briefly, there are the crucial transition points, 1- 5 of the scale,with level 1 the child displaying activity that is stereotypic, repetitive and passive. At Level 5 the child shows continuous and intense activity.
Signals of involvement, which are also detailed in full in this appendix, are used in conjunction with the scale which help the observer to make an overall judgment of the child's involvement.

The Leuven Involvement Scale for Young Children

LEVEL 1 - No activity

Activity at this level can be stereotypic, repetitive and passive. The child is absent and displays no energy. There is an absence of cognitive demand. The child characteristically may stare into space. N.B. This may be a sign of inner concentration.

LEVEL 2 - A frequently interrupted Activity

The child disengaged in an activity but half of the observed period includes moments of non-activity, in which the child is not concentrating and is staring into space. there may be interruptions frequently in the child's concentration, but his/her involvement is not enough to return to the activity.

LEVEL 3 - Mainly continuous activity

The child is busy at an activity but it is at a routine level and the real signals for involvement are missing. There is some progress but energy is lacking and concentration is at a routine level. The child can be easily distracted.

LEVEL 4 - Continuous Activity with intense moments

The child's activity has intense moments during which activities at Level 3 can come to have special meaning. Level 4 is reserved for the kind of activity seen in those intense moments, and can be deduced from the 'involvement signals'. This level of activity is resumed after interruptions. Stimuli, from the surrounding environment, however attractive cannot seduce the child away from the activity.

LEVEL 5 - Sustained Intense activity

The child shows continuous and intense activity revealing the greatest involvement. The level of the performance matches the capabilities of the child. Any disturbance or interruption would be seen as frustrating to the child. In the observed period not all the signals may be present but the essential components must be there; they are concentration, creativity, energy and persistence. This intensity must be present for almost all of the observation period.

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LEUVEN INVOLVEMENT SCALE
Signals of Involvement

- **Concentration**

The attention of the child is directed toward the activity . Nothing can distract the child from their deep concentration.

- **Energy**

The child invests much power in the activity and is eager and busy. Such energy is often expressed by loud talking, pressing down hard on the paper. Mental energy can be deduced from facial expressions which reveal 'hard' thinking.

- **Complexity and Creativity**

Shown when a child freely mobilises his cognitive skills and other capabilities in more than routine behaviour . The child involved cannot show more competence - they are at their very 'best' . Creativity does not mean that original products have to result , but that the child exhibits an individual touch and what they do furthers their own creative development. The child is at the very edge of their capabilities.

- **Facial Expression and Posture**

Non-verbal signs are extremely important in reaching a judgment about involvement. It is possible to distinguish between 'dreamy empty' eyes and 'intense' eyes. Posture can reveal high concentration or boredom. Even when children are seen only from the back their posture can be revealing.

- **Persistence**

Persistence is the duration of the concentration at the activity. Children who are really involved do not let go of the activity easily; they want to continue with the satisfaction, flavour and intensity it gives them, and are prepared to put in effort to prolong it. They are not easily distracted by other activities. 'Involved' activity is often more prolonged but it is dependent on the age and the development of the child.

- **Precision**

Involved children show special care for their work and are attentive to detail. Non-involved children gloss over such detail- it is not so important to them.

- **Reaction time**

Children who are involved are alert and react quickly to stimuli e.g. children 'fly' to a proposed activity and show great motivation and keenness. NB. It may be only an initial reaction and therefore short-lived.

- **Language**

Children can show that an activity has been important to them by their comments e.g. they ask for the activity repeatedly. They state that they enjoyed it!

- **Satisfaction**

The children display a feeling of satisfaction with their achievements.

N.B.
The signals are channels for observer awareness. They are not to be used on a scale basis, instead they are a means of making an overall judgment of the child's involvement. The observer can use the signals to build an image of the child and 'become that child'. By becoming the child and trying to establish how the child really feels etc., it allows the observer to ascertain the level of involvement.

The Adult Style Observation Schedule for Early Childhood Education

Background information

As early years practitioners and researchers we've all felt when a setting feels right, and the atmosphere and general ambiance is comfortable. Yet very often it is difficult to decipher what actually makes it so right and so conducive to learning ! Often it is the people, the relationships and the interaction. Children need warmth, security, and as quoted by the Early Years Curriculum Group, "the relationships which children establish with adults and other children are of central importance in their development" (Early Years Curriculum Group,1992;p. 15) and as recognised by Her Majesty's Inspectorate "children's self-esteem is profoundly influenced by the regard in which they are held by others" (Her Majesty's Inspectorate ,1989; p. 12) and that it is the "quality and consistency of relationships" that helps shape children's regard for themselves and others.

Relationships exist in early childhood settings at a variety of levels; between adult and child, between child and child, between the adults themselves and the children's parents. "The professionalism and personal qualities of teachers are of fundamental importance in making the child's school life a successful, satisfying and rewarding experience."(Early Years Curriculum Group,1992; p 21). I recognise that this statement can equally apply to any adult in any early years setting. The very nature of these relationships are crucial to the child's well being, as stated in the Department of Education and Science Report, "young children are social beings and learning should take place in a social context" (Department of Education and Science,1990; p. 36).The importance of the relationships in a setting are recognised by both Vygotsky and Bruner. Vygotsky (1978) believed that it is from social interaction that higher functioning develops, and Bruner (1980) emphasised that partnership between children and adults enhances problem solving. Although they both stress the cognitive merits of children receiving positive relationships, they also explain the interweaved importance of the sheer enjoyment and satisfaction of children playing with others.

Central to these relationships and interaction is 'talk,' which is vital to the learning process for children, "it should be reciprocal and often initiated and led by the child" (Department of Education and Science,1990; p. 36). The adult's role is to develop, stimulate and sustain children's interests. It is essential that a child's sense of awe,wonder and inherent curiosity in the world around them, is maintained. (Early Years Curriculum Group,1992; p 25). " It is in fact nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry: for this delicate little plant, aside from stimulation, stands mainly in need of freedom without this it goes to wrack and ruin without fail" (Albert Einstein in Rogers,C 1983; dedication).

Bearing these principles in mind, an essential aspect of any study involving children must take into account the important role that the adults can play in the children's learning. Carl Rogers (1983) in his study of how students learn showed that a number of teacher qualities facilitate student's learning. These he identified as:

a) 'realness' or 'genuineness,' where the facilitator does not present a facade to the learner.

b) 'prizing, acceptance and trust', where the facilitator accepts the learners feelings as being important and part of the learning process.

c.) 'empathetic understanding' where the facilitator really understands and sympathises how it feels to stand in the learners shoes.

He found where teachers displayed these 'facilitative' qualities there was more student talk, more problem solving, more questions, more involvement in learning, more eye contact, higher levels of cognition and greater creativity. As Rogers stated dramatically,

"You can sense persons being created, learnings being initiated, future citizens rising to meet the challenge of

unknown worlds." (Rogers, 1969; p 131).

From Rogers 'facilitative' qualities Pascal, Bertram, Ramsden(1994) developed the concept of 'Engagement'. Engagement can be defined as "a set of personal qualities which describe the nature of educative relationships between the adult and the child. These personal qualities will affect an adult's ability to motivate, extend, enhance and involve children in the learning process. An adult's actions may therefore be categorises as displaying 'engaging' or 'non engaging' qualities." (Pascal, Bertram, Ramsden,1994; p. 66.) In a similar way, Ferre Laevers from the Catholic University in Leuven Belgium reflected these personal qualities of 'engagement' into three categories of adult behaviour: stimulation,sensitivity and autonomy. He spent time developing a research instrument which identified this teacher behaviour or 'teacher style'.

At Worcester College we trialled the 'Teacher Style'(1993) observation research instrument in various early years settings. However we found that the number of categories that Ferre Laevers used in it were too complex to use out in the field. For the purposes of collaborative practitioner research we needed a more concise, 'user friendly' research instrument.

It was for this reason that we adapted the instrument, The Adult Style Observation Schedule-Early Childhood Education, in order to provide a profile of the adult style in a setting.(Full details can be found in this Appendix.) It is used positively to help practitioners evaluate areas of their overall style which could be developed more fully. The aim of the data collection is not to highlight individual adults but to show the setting's profile with regard to 'engagement'.

Adult Style Observation Schedule for Early Childhood Education (ASOS-ECE)

('The Quality Evaluation and Development Process'- Pascal, Bertram, and Ramsden 1994; p 67-71)

Observation /Action categories

The Adult Style Observation Schedule is based on the belief that the quality of the interactions between the educator and the child is a critical factor in the effectiveness of the learning experience. It aims to focus attention on the style of the adults interventions in the learning process. The observations have three foci or **Action Categories**:

- STIMULATION
- SENSITIVITY
- AUTONOMY

Within these 3 categories the following actions of the adult are used in order to facilitate a judgment of the adult's style.

- **Stimulation**

This is the way the adult stimulates the child. The observations focus on the following actions of the adult:
- introducing or offering an activity
- giving information
- intervening in an ongoing activity to stimulate action, thinking or communication

- **Sensitivity**

This is the sensitivity of the adult to the feelings and emotional well being of the child, including elements of empathy, sincerity and authenticity. The observations focus on the adults responsiveness to a range of children's needs including:
- a child's need for respect: giving the child a feeling of being valued and put on an equal basis
- a child's need for attentiveness: listening to the child, acknowledging the need for attention
- a child's need for security: recognising and responding to the child's insecurities and uncertainties
- a child's need for affection: responding to the child with warmth and care
- a child's need for praise and encouragement: giving the child praise and support

- **Autonomy**

This is the degree of freedom the adult gives the child to experiment, make judgments, choose activities and express ideas. Also how the adult handles conflict, rules and behavioural issues. The observations focus on:
- the degree of child choice of activity
- the opportunities for children to experiment
- the freedom of the child to choose and shape the direction of activity
- the respect given to the child's work, ideas and judgment of the finished product
- the opportunity for the children to negotiate and solve problems and conflicts
- the participation of the child in rule making and enforcement

These 3 Action Categories are observed and then each is located on a 5 point scale according to their style or the qualities that they convey.
The 5 point Adult Style Observation Schedule is a continuum.
This continuum flows from point 1 to point 5.
Each point on the 5 point schedule reflects the degree to which the observed actions convey those adult qualities which are supportive of children's learning.

5 Point Scale:
Point 1 will represent a style that is totally non-supportive of children's learning.
Point 2 will represent a style which is mainly non-supportive but has evidence of some supportive qualities.
Point 3 will represent a style where neither supportive or non-supportive qualities predominate.
Point 4 will represent a style which is mainly supportive but has evidence of some non-supportive qualities.
Point 5 will represent a style that is totally supportive of children's learning.

Qualities of Point 1: Totally Non-Supportive of Children's Learning

STIMULATION: The intervention
- is done in a routine way
- lacks energy and enthusiasm
- demotivates the child
- does not match the child's interest or perceptions
- is not pitched appropriately
- lacks richness and clarity
- is confusing
- does not stimulate action, thinking or communication

SENSITIVITY: The adult
- has a negative tone
- is cold and distant
- does not respect the child
- criticises and rejects the child
- does not empathise with the child's needs and concerns
- does not listen to the child or respond to the child

AUTONOMY: The adult
- gives child no room for choice
- gives no room for experimentation
- does not encourage child's ideas
- does not give child responsibility
- does not allow the child to judge the quality of a finished product
- is authoritarian and dominant
- rigidly enforces rules and boundaries

Qualities of Point 5: Totally Supportive of Children's Learning

STIMULATION: The intervention
- is full of energy and life
- motivates the child
- is pitched appropriately
- matches the child's interests and perceptions
- is rich and has clarity
- stimulates action, thinking or communication

SENSITIVITY: The adult
- has a positive tone
- is warm and demonstrates affection
- puts self on same level as child
- respects and values the child
- gives encouragement and praise
- empathises with the child's needs and concerns
- listens to and responds to the child
- encourages the child to trust

AUTONOMY: The adult
- allows the child to choose and supports this choice
- provides opportunities for experimentation
- encourages child-initiated ideas and responsibility
- respects the child's judgment of the quality of a finished product
- encourages the child to negotiate conflict, develop and apply rules

Chatterbox Playgroup Vignette
Written by Practitioner: Catherine. NNEB

The context

I chose to base my vignette upon 'story time.'
On 17.1.95 I used a 'Mr Big Ears' glove puppet to help tell a story to the children at playgroup.

My hopes

I hoped that all the children would be captivated and a story would be enjoyed by all. I used the glove puppet to keep the interest of the children, because in previous story times the children had become restless and some children had disturbed others who had been listening.

Who was involved ?

Myself and all the children at playgroup(who comprised a cross section of ages from 3 years to 4.75 years, with a range of concentration and intellectual abilities.)

What I did

I told the story of 'The three little pigs' with the book and the glove puppet. All the children were sat around me on the floor and I was on a chair, so that I could handle the glove puppet. Mr Big Ears was in a closed vanity case. I explained to the children that today I had brought a friend into Playgroup to see them but he was a little nervous and he did not like too much noise or shouting!!!

I produced Mr Big Ears who said "hello" to everyone via me.
I proceeded to tell the story and when the pigs were being introduced, I used individual voices. When I spoke of the pig who was lazy (house of straw) Mr Big ears leaned over flat, pretending to be lazy. The children found this funny.
Mr Big Ears shook when the wolf came, and the children, by speaking gently to him (saying there there), stopped him doing so. The children joined in the story when it came to the sections spoken by the wolf " I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house down" and, by the pigs " not by the hair of my chinny chin chin."

At the end of the story the children all stroked Mr Big Ears, said "bye bye" and waved. I then put him gently back into the case.

What happened as a result ?

The children were all 'held' even those who usually fidget, chatter and have a short concentration span. They enjoyed the story as a whole and it also encouraged their listening and conversational skills. My hopes were far exceeded.

What was the impact?

The impact was quite great with lots of conversation for the rest of the morning about Mr. Big Ears and about the story.

Why did this happen?

I think this was because the story was not too long, it had lots of pace, character, repetition and child involvement, with the added bonus of Mr Big Ears to bring alive and give added interest. The children liked the individual voices too.